

KARL GRIER THE STRANGE STORY OF A MAN WITH A SIXTH SENSE

XXII. Nora Faces the Inevitable

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I QUITTED Charing Cross in a state of nervous exaltation to which my seasoned heart had long been a stranger.

But Fate, the master playwright, had ordained that influences I had not foreseen should fill the stage for many an hour ere I reached the Castello Rondo in far-off Italy. In fact, none of us had taken into account Karl's mother.

Mrs. Grier was not enamoured of high society as it is understood in London. She was a German, and she had never lost her Teuton's tastes. First and necessarily a good housekeeper, she gave her spare time to reading. She hardly ever glanced at a newspaper, nor did she dawdle through more than one novel a year. She kept her household accounts, contrived economies in an annual expenditure of many thousands, looked after the practical management of certain estates, and for the rest saw as little as possible of fashionable folk, but isolated herself with some portentous professorial treatise on the more serious matters of life or sought relaxation in the pages of her beloved Schiller.

This was excellent while Grier senior was accumulating riches and Karl followed the beaten track leading to a suitable marriage and a peerage. But she had lost none of her maternal love for her wonderful son, and her shrewd eyes soon divined the anxiety of her husband, the silent endurance of Karl. At first her questions encountered a certain gentlemanly evasiveness. She persisted, and the elder Grier admitted that all was not well between Karl and Nora.

Then the mother entered the arena, and you need never ask in whose behalf she drew the sword. "If Karl does not want to marry Nora Cazenove, why are you trying to force him into a distasteful match?" she demanded of her distressed partner.

"I am doing nothing of the kind," was the instant answer.

"Then who is doing it?"

"No one. He seemed to be happy in his engagement. All went well until this inf—this dreadful sixth sense of his seized upon him, threatening to wring the very soul out of him."

"I believe he has always hankered after Maggie Hutchinson."

"How can that be? We have not coerced his judgment. He has not made the slightest effort to meet her for years. I am not prone to superstition, but there are times when I imagine that the watch Constantine gave him is an evil thing, a constant reminder of the man's unhappy death."

To what a depth of misery must my old friend have been reduced before he would seek such an ignoble explanation of his sorrows!

"*Unberufen! Unberufen!*" cried Mrs. Grier, for she was born in the Black Forest, and the scientific essay was not yet written which would rescue her wholly from belief in cryptic omens of malign import.

On the morning of my departure for Como, Karl did not appear at breakfast. His mother went to him. She found him in his dressing-room, smoking in seeming content.

"Now, Karl," she said, sitting on an arm of his easy-chair and placing a loving hand on his shoulder, "tell me all about it."

He was far too wise to pretend to misunderstand. "There is not much to tell, mother," he said placidly. "I find that I cannot marry Nora, and in view of the widespread interest taken in our engagement, that is a sad thing, is it not?"

"What is stopping you from marrying her?" she asked.

"Some intangible influence which you women call love. It is an affinity whose properties are shared by all creation, from unicellular protozoa up, or down, to the highest anthropoids. Even air and

water are composed of sympathetic gases; so—"

"Karl, be serious."

"Mother, I am serious. Paris was drawn to Helen by a living force which leaped the strongest walls of reason and morality, and the same impetuous movement unites two atoms of hydrogen to one atom of oxygen in order to form water. Now wait a moment! Introduce a Menelaus or an atom of nitrogen, and you have an explosion."

"You are fencing with me, *liebchen*."

"Indeed, I am not."

"Then if Margaret Hutchinson is your Helen, and there is no Menelaus, you must tell Nora Cazenove that it would not be fair to her to take her as your wife when you love another."

"Do you think that is the best thing to do?"

"I am so sure of it that if you dislike the task I will go to her myself."

Karl saw that his mother meant what she said. Heavy-hearted by the necessity of it, he set himself deliberately to deceive her. "There is no harm in waiting a few days," he said.

"There is every harm. Your father is quite beside himself with care. I have never seen him so disturbed."

Karl bit his pipe firmly between his teeth. His father had kept the secret then! His mother did not know all!

"I have a reason for saying that," he continued after a slight pause. "However faithfully I may have worshiped Maggie from afar, there is no knowing how she regards me."

"But you do know."

"Not in the accepted meaning of the term. I may be blinded by my own conceit. To settle matters, an old friend has gone to Como to see how my innamorata regards me."

"An old friend, you say! Who is it that is

so greatly interested in my son?"

He knew that his mother's heart rebelled against the suggestion of a stranger taking part in affairs so vital to himself of which she had been kept in ignorance.

With a well-assumed carelessness, he told her how Hooper and I were planning to expedite his wooing, and he so insisted on the humor of our dark conspiracy, when he was fully aware of each act and word, that he won a smile to her kindly face. Yet her alarmed perplexity did not abate. There was a subtle change in Karl which in no way escaped her. He was thinner, altogether unstrung and devitalized. She was conscious, too, of a physical tension in his attitude which was strangely at variance with the wonted suppleness of an athletic youngster of his fine proportions.

"When does this embassy return?" she asked musingly.

"I cannot say. You forget that I have not been consulted," he grumbled with a well-feigned laugh.

"And Mr. Hooper remains in London?"

"That is a part of the plot."

"Very well. Be ready to take me to the hotel in half an hour. There is a flower-show at Richmond which I wish to visit. We shall call for Mr. Hooper, drive to Richmond, pass sometime at the show, and return here for tea."

In a word, Karl was to be tied to his mother's apron-strings for awhile. And Hooper was to be drawn judiciously. It was a simple expedient; Mrs. Grier had failed utterly to recognize the real nature of the problem which faced her, and not her alone, but all of us. Her son's sixth sense had always remained a thing apart and wholly incomprehensible. She had heard little of it during recent years. The pranks he used to play occasionally served only to amuse her. Thus, he could summon any servant in the house by causing that particular domestic to fancy he or she heard a bell or a voice. He was exceedingly reliable as a weather-prophet, especially when the conditions were settled for either rain or sunshine. Once,

when a guest, a *malade imaginaire*, was bothering Mrs. Grier and her cook by the multiplicity of dishes he could not eat and the few he could eat but which disagreed with him, Karl made him tackle an outrageous meal of many courses with a hearty gusto. The poor man's famished digestion stood the ordeal well, and he slept for twelve hours thereafter, to the great joy of the household and his own confusion.

Mrs. Grier kept the two young men busy all the day, and insisted on Hooper remaining to dinner that evening. She learned not a word which cleared the puzzle. Hooper and Karl were chiefly reminiscent in their talk. The shrewd American quickly took the cue of his friend's attitude. Neither by look nor speech did he betray the trust reposed in him. Mrs. Grier twice swung the conversation round to the occupants of the Castello Rondo. She did this neatly and without undue insistence, and just as cleverly did Hooper express his desire to meet such an exceptionally gifted girl as Maggie Hutchinson was, by all accounts.

Dear lady! She remained awake that night until assured that Karl was safe and sound in his room. She was bewildered, but far from alarmed. Yet she knelt and prayed long and earnestly for the welfare of her loved ones, husband and son, and her last conscious words, uttered with trembling lips ere she closed her tear-laden eyes, were:

"Karl, *mein liebchen*, Gott befohlen!"

Little did she dream that she owed her restful sleep to the influence which Karl exerted in her behalf, nor has she ever known the terrible strain she imposed by her well-meant efforts to pierce the mystery which surrounded him. That was mercifully kept from her. Had she ever realized that the long-drawn-out program she devised in order to distract his mind was really the quickest means to



"For Fity's Sake, Take Me Home! Karl Is Dead"